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Facebook and political participation: Going beyond over-optimistic predictions

Isidoropaulo Casteltrione, Queen Margaret University

icasteltrione@qmu.ac.uk

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Abstract

In the last decade there has been a proliferation of academic studies examining the links between social networking websites (SNSs) and citizens' political participation. Focusing on Facebook and on the specific contexts of Italy and the United Kingdom, this article adds to this strand of research and explores the limitations of this SNS as a political platform. The findings indicate three possible factors limiting the contributions of Facebook to political participation, namely, the non-universality of Facebook, its questionable credibility as a political information source and the enduring relevance of the offline dimension of political participation. In the light of these results, the article goes on to argue that the mobilizing force of Facebook rests, at least in part, on its connection with the offline world. Moreover, the research evidence underpinning this article suggests that the most effective way in which Facebook can aid political participation is, perhaps, by bridging the online–offline divide, integrating and supporting other media and offline activities.

Keywords

political participation

Facebook

social networks

Italy

United Kingdom

limitations

offline

Introduction: A political communication study

Due to the widespread and rapid penetration of social networking websites (SNSs) – web-based services that ‘allow individuals to present themselves, articulate their social networks, and establish or maintain connections with others’ (Ellison et al. 2007: 1143) – into diverse segments of the worldwide population, in the last few years there has been an outbreak of news stories and academic and non-academic studies concentrating on these platforms. This trend is likely to carry on considering how embedded SNSs have become in many individuals’ daily routines, and the consequences that their adoption can have on disparate aspects of people’s lives – ranging from less serious matters such as shopping and organization of recreational activities, to more weighty affairs like the coordination of protest movements. Given the role SNSs played in the Arab Spring and in political campaigns such as the 2008 Obama’s presidential campaign, an increasing number of investigations have examined how these platforms can contribute to political campaigning, engagement and participation (e.g. Lim 2012; Papacharissi 2015; Towner 2013; Vitak et al. 2011).

The present article adds to this stream of research by exploring – from the perspective of political communication – the factors that *limit* the contributions of Facebook to political participation. Political communication, broadly defined as ‘the role of communication in the political process’ (Chaffee 1975: 15), is highly interdisciplinary, drawing on concepts from several fields such as mass communication, political science, sociology and psychology (Semetko and Scammell 2012). The research on which this article is based can be considered a textbook political communication study in that it inherits the interest in attitudes, opinions and beliefs from social psychology (Ryfe 2001), while borrowing its focus on behaviours from the behaviourist school of political science (see Dahl 1961). Finally, by investigating the effects of

Facebook usage on citizens' political participation, this study assumes an effects-style approach in the fashion of mass communication research (Lievrouw 2009).

SNSs and political participation research

Political participation is a widely investigated subject in academic studies. It is a *multidimensional* phenomenon (Casteltrione 2015) encompassing activities that can differ highly in terms of the resources they require (e.g. time and skills) and the purposes driving them. As a concept political participation extends from attempts to influence governments' actions (Verba et al. 1995) to discursive performance designed to express a political identity (Marichal 2013). Drawing on Verba et al.'s theorization of *voluntary political participation* (1995) and Christy's conceptualization of *communication activities* (1987), in this article, political participation is defined as a set of activities aiming to *influence* governments' actions and other individuals' political behaviours, and/or to *reflect* individuals' interest and psychological involvement in politics.

The multifaceted nature of political participation is also stressed by Vedel (2007) who proposes three axes for making sense of the political uses of the Internet, namely, information, discussion and mobilization. In relation to the information axis, research attests to the relevance of SNSs as information sources and finds that one of the main motivations behind their usage is the gathering of political information (Baresch et al. 2011; Mitchell et al. 2013; Rainie and Smith 2012; Weeks and Holbert 2013). Concerning the political discussion axis, Kushin and Kitchener (2009) recognize that these platforms have created unprecedented opportunities for human-to-human interaction and grown into a unique arena for online discussion. Likewise, Bae (2013)

highlights the growing centrality of SNSs as a venue for citizens' political conversations. Along the same lines, focusing on political talk – namely a 'non-purposive, informal, casual, and spontaneous political conversation voluntarily carried out by free citizens, without being constrained by formal procedural rules and predetermined agenda' (Kim and Kim 2008: 54) – Wright et al. (2016) argue that SNSs are arenas in which political talk is present and can even thrive. With respect to the mobilization dimension SNSs have assumed a key role in activists' repertoires. Obar et al. (2012) find that members of advocacy groups employ social media to communicate with citizens on a daily basis, and believe that these platforms have aided them in their advocacy and organizational efforts. Lim (2012) explains that in Egypt social media enabled activists to reach and expand networks of disaffected Egyptians, frame issues, propagate messages and transform online activism into offline protests. In a similar fashion, Valenzuela et al. (2012) and Theocharis (2011) find that SNSs like Facebook were instrumental to the organization and coordination of Chilean and Greek youths' protest activity. Warren et al. (2014) reveal that activists use Facebook to seek and obtain information, promote social events, call for donations and volunteers, schedule plans and discuss social issues. In a qualitative study involving Australian, American and British activists, Vromen et al. (2015) confirm these findings and establish that all the studied groups embraced – whether enthusiastically or reluctantly – Facebook as an organizational tool.

Finally, there are also numerous general studies focusing on political participation that share such a techno-optimistic stance and establish that SNSs can aid and promote citizens' political participation (Baek 2015; Bond et al. 2012; Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2012; Holt et al. 2013; Towner 2013; Xenos et al. 2014). Among the various techno-optimist scholars, Castells (1996, 2010, 2012) has strongly influenced the field and deserves a particular mention. In *Networks of*

Outrage and Hope he analyses the role of the Internet in the Arab Spring, the Spanish Indignados and the Occupy Wall Street movement, concluding that ‘the digital social networks based on the Internet and on wireless platforms are decisive tools for mobilizing, for organizing, for deliberating, for coordinating and for deciding’ (Castells 2012: 229).

However, there are voices outside the optimist chorus on the impact of SNSs on political participation. Within this more cautious research strand it is possible to identify two other schools of thought: the *normalizers* and the pessimists. The normalizers sit somewhere in the middle between the optimists and pessimists, and emphasize the tendency of SNSs to reinforce existing participatory patterns by mainly aiding those citizens already interested in politics (Carlisle and Patton 2013; Gustafsson 2012; Mascheroni 2012; Vesnic-Alujevic 2012; Vitak et al. 2011; Yoo and Gil de Zúñiga 2014). These scholars follow in the tradition of academics such as Bimber (2003) or Tedesco (2004) who, focusing on the Internet in general, argue that even if digital technologies have in part transformed the ways of doing politics, they have not changed who participate in politics (Bimber 2003), providing politically interested citizens with further ways to engage and participate (Tedesco 2004).

Lastly, at the other end of the continuum there is a group of academics assuming a more pessimistic stance. In their study exploring the reasons why members of the public visited MySpace profiles of 2008 US primary candidates, Ancu and Cozma (2009) determine that users are attracted to MySpace mainly because they desire social interaction with other like-minded individuals, a type of usage negatively related to campaign involvement in the study. Fenton and Barassi (2011) also argue that SNSs have a negative influence on political participation. They contend that such negative effects are linked to the tendency of these platforms to foster individualism and personal affairs, which disconnect individuals from the public terrain of

political participation and guide them away from the communality of collective political endeavour (Fenton and Barassi 2011). Similarly, Marichal (2013) asserts that digital technologies, instead of fostering citizens' mobilization, can facilitate *microactivism*. Microactivism includes actions such as creating political Facebook groups and uploading political videos on YouTube, and it is a form of political participation that does not aim to affect governments' actions, but echoes micro-level intentions (Marichal 2013). Morozov (2011) argues that microactivism can negatively affect citizens' political engagement in that it facilitates *slacktivism*, which encompasses activities that satisfy people's needs for social connection but detract from more formal and meaningful types of political participation, therefore having no impact on political outcomes. Likewise, Fuchs (2014) offers a critical account of social media. Drawing on a number of examples such as the Arab Spring and the Occupy movement, he questions the emancipatory capabilities of social media and the notion of Twitter and Facebook revolutions.

Fuchs warns of the dangers of deterministic approaches and emphasizes that the effects of social media are as contradictory as the society we live in. Thus, he argues that 'the Internet is a techno-social system... embedded in the antagonisms of contemporary society and therefore has no in-built effects or determinations' (Fuchs 2014: 84).

Research question

A review of research looking into the contributions of SNSs to political participation reveals that over-optimistic findings and predictions characterize numerous studies falling within this subject area. The work of Fuchs (2014) and other scholars highlight that such an enthusiasm is not always justified, and that more balanced and cautious approaches are needed when studying the

links between digital technologies and politics. Responding to this call for caution, the present article examines how Facebook can contribute to political participation. However, rather than focusing on the affordances of this SNS (see Casteltrione 2016 for such an account) it explores its *limitations*. Accordingly, one general research question shapes the argument of this article:

RQ: Focusing on British and Italian Facebook users, what are the limitations of Facebook as a political participation platform?

Rather than seeking contextual differences, the article aims to identify possible analogies between British and Italian Facebook users, offering a critical reflection that goes beyond national contexts. This enables us to complement the work of scholars such as Fuchs and demonstrate that, despite the need of acknowledging contextual particularities, studies that provide arguments more general in scope remain useful and can contribute to the development of the field.

Methodology

Adopting a cross-national approach

Unlike numerous investigations in this area – a gap highlighted by Boulianne (2015) in her meta-analysis of research on social media use and participation in civic and political life – the present article adopts a cross-national approach. Warnick and Osherson (1973) observe that cross-national research can facilitate the assessment of the generalizability of findings by testing them in diverse settings (see also Moy et al. 2012). Furthermore, comparative cross-national research

can also perform a heuristic function, providing an effective venue for the generation of hypotheses and theories (Warnick and Osherson 1973). This is also stressed by Nowak, who even argues that ‘in order to formulate and to test our theory in its general formulation, we usually need a cross-national study’ (1997: 15). In light of its assets, it is evident how the cross-national comparative method can aid the researcher in offering a critical reflection that goes beyond national contexts and identifying more general inhibitors of Facebook political participation.

Livingstone (2003) identifies a series of theoretical and practical decisions that researchers have to make when engaging in cross-national research. These decisions include the selection of countries, the degree of methodological standardization to pursue and the position to assume on the emic–etic continuum – the emic approach aims to assess how attitudinal and behavioural phenomena are expressed uniquely in each culture, while the etic approach is primarily interested in identifying universals (Moutinho and Hutcheson 2011) – when interpreting the data. In regard to this latter decision, an etic approach was adopted in the present article, and analogies rather than differences were sought for. A high degree of methodological standardization was also pursued and attention was devoted to guaranteeing equivalence in samples selection and recruitment, data collection methods and measurement procedures. With respect to the selection of countries, three considerations have guided the selection of Italy and the United Kingdom. First, these two countries are characterized by somewhat comparable political participatory trends. Many British and Italian citizens are, in fact, dissatisfied with mainstream political parties and institutions (Curran et al. 2014), and participation in formal party politics has decreased sharply in the two countries over the last two decades (Donovan and Onofri 2008; Whiteley 2012). The second reason is the similar penetration of Facebook in Italy

and the United Kingdom at the time of the data collection (Socialbakers 2012): today, Facebook remains the most popular SNS in these two countries (Facebook 2017). Finally, Italy and the United Kingdom were also chosen because they are the countries with which the researcher is most familiar, and his substantive knowledge is an advantage practically and methodologically in that it can facilitate equivalence in the cross-national comparison (Landman 2008).

Hence, considering the theory generation capacity of *few-countries* studies (Landman 2008), the researcher's background knowledge of Italy and the United Kingdom, and the similarities between the two countries in terms of political participatory trends and Facebook's penetration, Italy and the United Kingdom were deemed two interesting and potentially fruitful cases for a cross-national comparison.

A mixed methods study

The present article was methodologically inspired by the research of Kavanaugh et al. (2008) on the *secondary effects* (Sproull and Kiesler 1991) of the Internet on political participation.

Accordingly, it adopted a sequential-explanatory mixed methods strategy. This research design entails a first quantitative phase, in which quantitative data are collected and analysed, followed by a qualitative phase, for a more detailed exploration of the phenomena under investigation (Ivankova et al. 2006). The data collection occurred in Italy and the United Kingdom during a period of similar electoral activity. Surveys were circulated on Facebook between March and June 2012, and interviews held between October and December 2012. During this timeframe, local elections took place in both countries in May, while no general elections were held.

A total of 392 online surveys – 196 from the British participants (BPs) and 196 from the Italian participants (IPs)¹ – were examined and their results further explored through 26 telephone/face-

to-face interviews – thirteen for BPs and thirteen for IPs.² Snowball sampling was employed in the first quantitative phase, while interviewees were selected through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling procedures. In the first phase of the study surveys were circulated on Facebook. The researcher's Facebook contacts were initially targeted – the targeted participants ensured a certain degree of variation in terms of demographics and levels of Facebook and political activity – and asked to circulate the surveys among their networks. Then, the quantitative samples were used as sampling frames for the qualitative stage of the research, and participants were selected on the basis of their scores on a number of key variables (e.g. age, Facebook political participation, etc.). As this process did not enable the recruitment of participants with profiles (i.e. young political activists, and individuals with low levels of political activity) deemed necessary to offer a full account of the contributions of Facebook to political participation, a further snowballing procedure was added.

It has to be noted that the adoption of non-probability sampling in the quantitative phase could have led to an error of coverage, which occurs when there is a difference between the target population³ and the sampling frame in that some segments of the population are systematically excluded from the sample (Fricker 2008). In order to limit such an error the quantitative samples' sizes were calculated taking into account the sizes of the British and Italian Facebook populations at the time of the data collection, confidence intervals were applied and the samples obtained were post-stratified so that they mirrored the respective Facebook populations in terms of age. These counter-measures were adopted to try to increase the representativeness of the samples, but even so the generalizability that random samples would have guaranteed could not be achieved.

Data collection and analysis

This article aims to explore the limitations of Facebook as a political platform. To this end, the levels of Facebook political participation and Facebook non-political activity were first compared. The goal of such a comparison was to determine how politics fits into a larger pattern of Facebook usage, and to what degree Facebook seems to be employed for non-political purposes. Online surveys were used to assess the respondents' participation in a number of non-political and political activities. Participants were asked how often (1=Never, 2=Rarely, 3=Sometimes, 4=Often, 5=Very often) during the last six months they had engaged through Facebook in specific activities (see Table 1), and two summated rating scales – i.e. Facebook non-political activity (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.866$) and Facebook political participation (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.948$) – were developed.

Table 1: Facebook political participation and non-political activity – scales.

Scales	Facebook non-political activity	Facebook political participation
Items	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consuming non-political news • Visiting profiles of non-political actors or organizations • Searching for non-political initiatives • Contacting family and friends • Non-political talk • Sharing information on non-political initiatives • Posting/uploading nonpolitical material • Organizing non-political initiatives • Joining a non-political group 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organizing/participating in a political initiative • Forming/joining a group or an organization developed around politics • Soliciting others to support or oppose a particular political party, candidate and/or initiative • Contacting a political party, candidate, government department and/or local council • Learning about a political initiative, meeting, rally and/or protest in which you took part • Learning about a political initiative, meeting, rally and/or protest • Consuming political news • Learning about a group or an organization developed around politics • Engaging in formal and informal political discussions • Expressing a political opinion

Descriptive statistics were employed in order to analyse quantitative data and were deemed appropriate to the general exploratory purpose of the study. Non-parametric rather than parametric statistical techniques were applied due to the non-normal distribution of the data, and the ordinal or nominal nature of the questionnaire variables. The Kolmogorov–Smirnov test with Lilliefors (1967) correction – which is best used for sample sizes of more than 50 with unknown population mean and variance – was run to assess the normality of the distributions of scores. The test established that the data were not normally distributed ($p < 0.05$) and, consequently, medians rather than means and interquartile range (IQR) rather than standard variation were used.

Quantitative results were then supplemented and extended through the subsequent qualitative stage. Greene et al. (2001) observe that, used in isolation, survey research does not offer much in terms of explanation of findings, and in-depth interviews, when combined with this method, can illustrate and enhance quantitative findings. In this respect, interviews were employed to delve into the participants' participatory repertoires and explore the factors limiting political activity on Facebook. Qualitative data were examined through a thematic analysis, a method that enables analysis and interpretation of data through the identification of common patterns (Boyatzis 1998) and has been often used in qualitative studies investigating the links between SNSs and political participation (e.g. Gustafsson 2012; Marichal 2013; Storsul 2014).

Results and discussion: The limitations of Facebook as a political platform

The limitations of Facebook as a political platform were, hence, explored in a two-step process. First, Italian and British respondents' Facebook political participation was compared with their Facebook non-political activity. After that, interviews were used to identify possible factors limiting political participation on this SNS.

Facebook usage practices

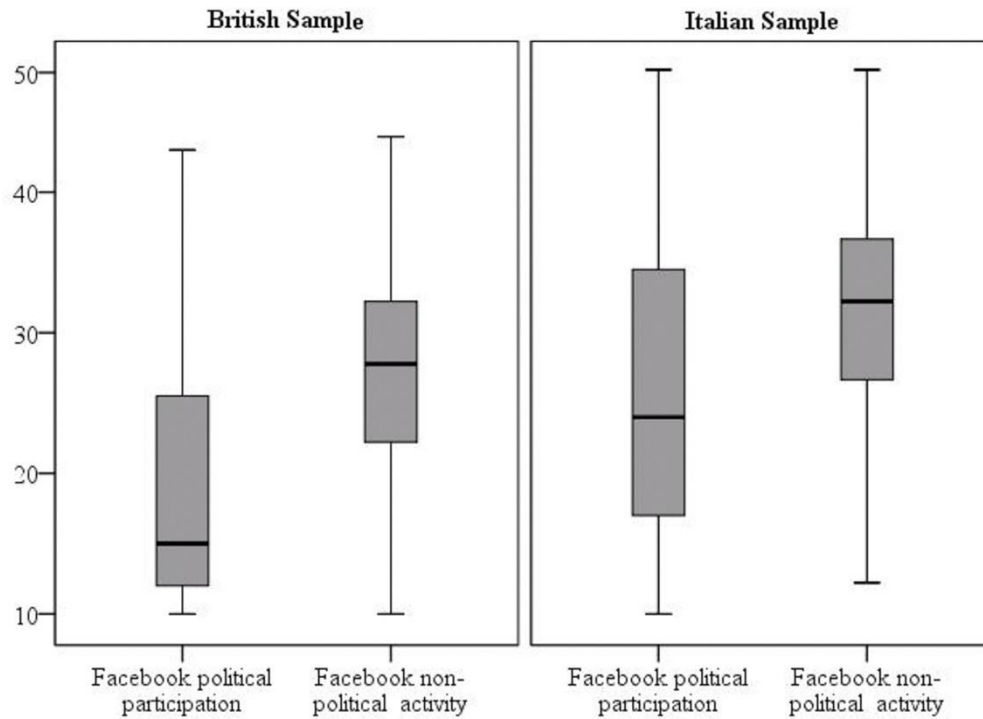
As shown in Table 2 and Figure 1, the comparison of Facebook political participation and Facebook non-political activity produced two main findings: (1) both British and Italian respondents engaged more often in Facebook non-political activities than in political ones; and (2) there was a discrepancy in terms of Facebook political participation among IPs and BPs, with the firsts slightly more active than BPs (the reasons behind such a participatory gap are not explored here as they are out of the remit of the article).

Table 2: Facebook political participation and non-political activity – descriptive statistics.¹

	British sample		Italian sample	
	Median	IQR	Median	IQR
Facebook political participation	15	14	24	18
Facebook non-political activity ⁴	28	10	32	10

^[1]10 (Never), 20 (Rarely), 30 (Sometimes), 40 (Often), 50 (Very often).

Figure 1: Facebook political participation and non-political activity – box plots.¹



^[1]10 (Never), 20 (Rarely), 30 (Sometimes), 40 (Often), 50 (Very often).

The dominantly non-political usage of Facebook was confirmed in the qualitative phase of the study. As illustrated in the following quotes, interviews showed that, except for *certain users* displaying particularly high levels of political participation and interest, Facebook was mainly used as a non-political platform.

Mainly non-political usage

Hilary – BP: ‘I use Facebook more to connect with friends and I don’t really like to bring politics into it [...] So I just keep Facebook as a sort of light-hearted [platform] [...] I don’t even share my political views on Facebook’.⁵

Ciro – IP: '[Facebook] is a social interface [...] For me it has mainly a social function'.⁶

Mainly political usage by highly politically active users

Rachel – BP: 'I would define myself as a political animal [...] a lot of what I do on Facebook is either Political, with a big P, [related to party politics], or political, with a small p [related to single-issue and local campaigns]'.

Vincent – BP: 'I do keep in touch with old friends, university friends, school friends on Facebook, but mostly I use it for politics because this is what I'm interested in and most of my friends are interested in'.

Such findings offer support to the reinforcement thesis, i.e. SNSs reinforce existing participatory patterns by mainly aiding those citizens who are already politically active, and are consistent with findings of other studies indicating that political usages of SNSs are often overshadowed by social interaction and entertainment (Baumgartner and Morris 2010; Mascheroni 2012).

However, it has to be acknowledged that the results of the present research could have been influenced by the timescale of the data collection. Differing from numerous SNSs and political participation studies which focus heavily on the campaign environment (e.g. Towner 2013; Vitak et al. 2011), the data collection for the current investigation was carried out mostly during non-electoral periods. Considering that political activity, both online and offline, fluctuates according to the proximity of elections, reaching its peaks in periods immediately prior to elections (Larson 2016), the choice of this specific timescale could have impacted negatively on the respondents' levels of political participation. In view of these considerations, while on the one hand it would

be plausible to assume that Facebook is mainly used for non-political purposes, on the other hand it could be reasoned that the gap between political and non-political usages which surfaced in this article may close during electoral periods.

The Facebook divide

The thematic analysis of the interviews indicated three possible factors limiting the contributions of Facebook to political participation. One factor is the non-universality of Facebook, with some participants stressing that this SNS reaches only part of the British and Italian populations, and requires digital skills that not all individuals hold.

Need of digital skills

Kaye – BP: ‘[I don’t participate much online and on Facebook because] I only had a computer for about 3 years. Before that I didn’t have [one, and] I didn’t use computers. I have learned fairly recently, so I would say it’s still not second nature to me in the way that it will probably be to some young children who have grown up always having one’.

Facebook usage gap

Rachel – BP: ‘Facebook is not yet universal. [For instance,] Friends of Union Terrace Gardens have members who are not online at all’.⁷

Mario – IP: ‘Anyone who organizes an event uses [Facebook] as the only tool and [...] probably this is a negative thing as people who do not participate digitally cannot get this information. We

have to remember that Facebook is a niche [...] because there is a big part of the population who does not use this website’.

The non-universality of Facebook is confirmed by statistics on the penetration of this SNS that, at the time of the data collection, reached around 50 per cent of the British population, and approximately 40 per cent of the Italian population (Socialbakers 2012). Taking into account the notion of *digital divide*, which refers to the gap in access to and usage of digital technologies (van Dijk 2009), it would be possible to talk of the presence of a *Facebook divide*. With regards to the relevance of digital skills for Facebook political participation, data support the findings of Borrero et al. (2014) and Gangadharbatla et al. (2014) and show that proficiency in the usage of digital technologies can positively influence the likelihood of engaging in political activities on SNSs.

The credibility of Facebook as a political information source

A second limitation of Facebook as a political platform is its questionable credibility as a political information source. Although both Italian and British interviewees acknowledged the value and the growing relevance of Facebook as a source of political information, numerous participants stressed the abundance of bogus news and unreliable sources on Facebook.

Issues of credibility of Facebook political information

Lesley – BP: ‘[On Facebook] there are so many things that are urban myths [...] I think a lot of the causes [you find on there] are urban myths too and so I like to take time to have a look at some of the websites and check where the things are coming from’.

Kaye – BP: ‘Newspapers have to go over [the sources] they get their stories from, and make sure to some extent that these are as much as possible true, whereas [on Facebook] people can write any odd thing and [...] lots of people would probably believe it’.

Luca – IP: ‘Facebook pays a price which is linked to its success. In my experience the so-called fakes – pictures that are not real, information that is not real, news that is not real – are certainly present’.

These findings support Johnson and Kaye (2014) who, comparing SNSs to eight other online information sources (i.e. political blogs, political websites, candidates’ websites, candidates’ blogs, YouTube, online broadcast TV news, online cable TV news and online newspapers), find that politically interested users rank these online platforms as the least credible sources.

Likewise, Gangadharbatla et al. (2014) indicate that, despite preferring to use social media for newsgathering, young adults still perceive traditional media as more credible.

The enduring relevance of the offline dimension

A third limitation of Facebook as a political platform emerged from the interviews with British and Italian *activists* (i.e. individuals who displayed high levels of political mobilization). They considered Facebook a key tool for the organization and promotion of political initiatives, but also highlighted the enduring relevance of the offline dimension of political participation, describing their political activity on Facebook as rooted in and supporting their offline activity.

Interdependence between Facebook and offline political participation

Francesca – IP: ‘I think that Facebook supports political entities which already exist [...] the online cannot exist without the offline, while the offline could survive without the online’.

Antonio – IP: ‘I think that Facebook is a very useful tool, in certain cases essential, but not sufficient on its own [...] Without offline organization, including small practical things such as requesting a square [for a rally], printing the flyers, organizing a press conference, etc. [...] [online activism] cannot work.’

In light of the strong links between Facebook and offline political activities, it could be argued that the mobilizing force of this SNS depends, at least in part, on its connection with the offline world, with Facebook best suited to support political entities that already exist and operate offline. Despite his techno-optimism, even Castells (2010) recognizes that the new social movements that use the Internet as their main organizational forum ‘do not exist only on the Internet [but] also root themselves in their local lives, and in face to face interaction’ (Castells 2010: 11), and can operate as a transformative force only by reclaiming urban spaces, i.e. the Occupy movement. Kavada (2010) also emphasizes that online communication does not necessarily lead to durable and effective activists’ networks, with regular face-to-face meetings still necessary. Fuchs is even more categorical and argues that: ‘there are no Twitter-, Facebook- or YouTube-revolutions. Only people who live under certain social conditions and organize collectively can make rebellions and revolutions. Technology is, in itself, not a revolution’ (2014: 102).

Bridging the online–offline divide

This article explored the limitations of Facebook as a political platform. By focusing on Italy and the United Kingdom and seeking analogies between British and Italian Facebook users, it demonstrates the enduring relevance of the offline dimension for both mobilization-related and information/communication-oriented activities. In relation to the consumption of political information, British and Italian Facebook users express concerns about the credibility of the information circulated on Facebook, highlighting the abundance of bogus information and unreliable sources and acknowledging their continuing reliance on popular media broadcasters. Unsurprisingly, this is confirmed by several studies focusing on the Italian and British contexts that establish that TV remains the main source of political information, principally for older people, with the Internet and SNSs only gradually growing in importance, particularly for younger people (AGCOM 2013; Chadwick 2013; Cremonesi et al. 2014; Dutton and Blank 2013; Papathanassopoulos et al. 2013; Scaglioni and Sfardini 2013). Among the studies reported above, Papathanassopoulos et al.'s (2013) is particularly worth mentioning, as it also focuses – among other countries (eleven in total) – on Italy and the United Kingdom. Their study indicates that, in nine out of eleven countries, television news remains at the top of the news hierarchy. Italy shows the highest average in terms of TV news consumption, while the exceptions are Norway and South Korea, two countries whose populations have widespread access to broadband Internet and in which the Internet is the main source of news (Papathanassopoulos et al. 2013).

The enduring relevance of the offline dimension is also confirmed with regards to the mobilization dimension of political participation. Interviews with British and Italian activists indicate that the offline world cannot be ignored, and suggest that in order to develop effective

political campaigns political entities have to cater also to those individuals who are not online. The quote from Rachel offers an example of how integration of both new and more traditional methods can overcome this usage (often generational) gap. Rachel mentioned the case of Friends of Union Terrace Gardens, and explained that in order to reach its older members; this organization has combined online communication tools (i.e. Facebook page and website) with more traditional methods such as letters.

The strong connection between the online and offline dimensions of political participation is arguably linked to the hybrid nature of today's media. Taking into account the changes in today's political communication environments due to the diffusion of new communication technologies, Chadwick develops the notion of the *hybrid media system*, which 'is built upon interactions among old and new media logics – where logics are defined as technologies, genres, norms, behaviours, and organizational forms – in the reflexively connected fields of media and politics' (2013: 4).

The findings presented in this article confirm the hybridity of the British and Italian political communication environments and offer indications on how political organizations, candidates and movements could harness Facebook and online media more generally. Despite its penetration, Facebook remains, in fact, a niche. Accordingly, when activists use this SNS or any other digital platform as the only mobilization tool, they deprive the citizens who are not on these platforms of a wealth of information and, consequently, limit their reach. As shown by the British political activist movement 38 Degrees and the Italian political party Movimento 5 Stelle – Five Stars Movement – which integrate offline and online repertoires to their advantage (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013; Chadwick 2013), integration of new and traditional media can overcome the online–offline divide and is, arguably, a far more effective strategy.

Conclusions: Integration and hybridity

In recent years, SNSs have become a hot topic for academics all over the world, with an increasing number of publications focusing on how these platforms can contribute to political participation. A review of the literature has shown that many studies paint a picture of positive effects and celebrate the mobilization and emancipatory affordances of SNSs (e.g. Castells 2012; Baek 2015). Other scholars emphasize the tendency of SNSs to reinforce existing participatory patterns (e.g. Vesnic-Alujevic 2012; Vitak et al. 2011), or adopt a more critical stance highlighting the drawbacks of these platforms (e.g. Fenton and Barassi 2011; Fuchs 2014). Drawing from an extensive and original data set acquired by combining a cross-national comparative approach and a mixed methods methodology, this article complements the work of this latter group of scholars and explores the limitations of Facebook as a political platform. By focusing on the similarities between British and Italian Facebook users, this article attempts to offer a critical reflection that goes beyond national contexts. In doing so it identifies three general inhibitors of Facebook political participation: the *non-universality* of Facebook, its *questionable credibility* as a political information source and the enduring *relevance of the offline* dimension of political participation.

Facebook is just one tool in the extensive and diverse political arsenal available to citizens. In order to think beyond the unrealistic predictions often characterizing the field and to truly contribute to its development, it is necessary to recognize that SNSs cannot be studied in isolation but need to be assessed within the *hybrid media systems* (Chadwick 2013) in which they operate. The SNSs are not a ‘magic elixir’ capable to increase citizens’ participation and reverse the *democratic deficit* characterizing western democracies (Norris 2011). The most

effective way in which they can aid political participation is, perhaps, by bridging the online–offline divide, integrating and supporting other media and offline activities.

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Notes

¹ Taking into account the sizes of the British and Italian Facebook populations, using a confidence interval of 95 per cent and allowing for a 7 per cent error, it was calculated that both samples required 196 participants.

² The number of participants to be interviewed was decided on the basis of guidelines for the definition of size of qualitative samples (Guest et al. 2006).

³ To be eligible for the study, participants had to be Facebook users, between the age of 18 and 65, and either British or Italian citizens.

⁴ Given the different number of items forming the two scales (10 vs 9), respondents' scores on the Facebook non-political activity scale have been ratioed up.

⁵ Fictional names are used in order to protect participants' privacy and anonymity.

⁶ Interviews with IPs were conducted in Italian and quotes were translated to English by the researcher.

⁷ The Friends of Union Terrace Gardens is a Scottish organization aiming to prevent large-scale development in Aberdeen's Union Terrace Gardens.